

# Critical Lessons and Playful Literacies: Digital Media in PK–2 Classrooms

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**D**igital technologies are transforming the literacy practices young children develop. For example, the nature of writing has changed: technology allows even the youngest learners to create digital texts combining drawing, writing, sound, and animation in ways never before possible. Digital texts differ from traditional text by being collaborative, co-constructed, and shared with an audience who will further shape and refine the text (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Luke & Grieshaber, 2004; Millard, 2003). Writing becomes enmeshed within a multiplicity of literacies, “a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communication technologies via spoken, print, and multimedia” (Luke & Freebody, 2000, p. 9).

From a New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995) perspective, the term *literacies* includes various practices for recording meanings, whether with pencils, laptops, puppets, toys, or cameras, or other materials. Literacies produce meaningful texts, such as fluid and temporary narratives in children’s dollhouse play, as well as fixed and durable print on pages of writing (Wohlwend, 2011). In this article, *writing* refers to the practice of putting words on a page, *drawing* is making images, and *playing* means enacting roles in pretense; *storying* encompasses all these practices and captures the range of multimodality in literacy practices.

The challenge of responsive teaching to develop expanding repertoires of literacy practices is further complicated by conflicting discourses about developmentally appropriate play-based curricula and academic accountability (Stipek, 2005; Wohlwend, 2011). As kindergarten becomes the new first grade, young five- and six-year-olds encounter print-inten-

sive literacy curricula and standards that may not fit their developmental needs and literacy understandings. Additionally, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) delineates a set of technology skills to be demonstrated by the age of eight in the National Education Technology Standards (ISTE, 2007). To meet these standards, storying must extend beyond the deceptively simple and solitary act of putting pen to paper; instead, it must encompass complex and interactive systems of meaning making, combining print, sound, image, and movement (Wohlwend, 2010). How might literacy curricula be updated and expanded in meaningful and developmentally responsive ways?

To answer this question, we turn to critical lessons from research on early literacy (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005) illustrating that literacy develops multimodally along many pathways, always situated within sociocultural environments. In this article, we bring critical lessons about development forward to reclaim and re-center play in a new literacies curriculum featuring collaborative storying and media production. Several of these critical lessons take on new relevance as we think about development in the context of new literacies and technologies (see Table 1).

Using filmmaking as a conduit, we explore the possibilities of playful early literacy curricula where groups of children create a shared text by pretending, drawing, writing, making props, animating puppets, playing with Star Wars Legos and other popular media toys, and operating new technologies. In this article, we offer classroom examples to illuminate possibilities and to illustrate critical lessons about young children’s developing new literacies.

**Table 1.** *Critical lessons in the context of new literacies and technologies\**

Critical Lesson	Developing New Literacies
The social community influences meaning construction.	Collaborative meaning making creates fluid, negotiated, and interactive texts.
Children construct and represent meaning through multiple symbol systems.	Multimodal storytelling opens multiple pathways into text.
Play is a particular symbol system especially relevant to young children's literacy.	Playful media pulls in children's imaginative strengths and popular culture passions.
Cultural tools are part of literacy development.	Producing with new technologies connects to children's lived experiences.

\*Adapted from Whitmore, et al., 2005, p. 297.

## Theoretical Background

### Collaboration and Storying

Children's pretense depends on the collaborative creation and maintenance of a single play narrative with collectively understood but fluid meanings. When young children collaborate in play, they may often stop to clarify the pretend meanings for classroom objects or to propose new roles or themes (Sawyer, 2003). Early childhood classroom studies show dramatic play and collaborative talk create a collective sphere of emerging and changing meanings and relationships shaped by children's negotiations (Blum-Kulka, Huck-Taglicht, & Avni, 2004; Danby, 2002; Dyson, 2001; Martin & Dombey, 2002; Rowe, 2003). The need to clearly define the rules for maintaining play creates breaks, allowing children to negotiate character roles and agree upon the meanings of their props before shifting back into pretense.

Vygotsky (1935/1978) theorized this kind of symbolic play with cultural meanings is a "particular form of speech . . . which leads directly to written language" (p. 111). We update this proposition to argue pretend play with its negotiated and co-produced texts is a kind of storying leading directly to media production and the participatory digital

literacies, such as filmmaking, that underlie social media.

### Research Contexts

Over the course of a year, the authors observed classrooms in a mid-sized Midwestern university town as part of a larger project to further understand the productive aspects of new literacies and popular media in preschool and elementary classrooms. Classroom activity was video-recorded as teachers and researchers implemented play-based critical media literacy curricula in three contexts: two classrooms at a university-run preschool, a K–1 multiage classroom at a public charter school, and a K–8 elective filmmaking class at the same public charter school. Each of the two preschool classrooms had use of two Flip Cameras as well as a netbook for editing; the K–1 multiage classroom and elective film class had the use of multiple Flip Cameras as well as three desktop computers and a mobile laptop lab.

Researchers observed and interacted with children as they viewed popular media clips, collaborated to write scripts, drew storyboards, animated media toys and handmade puppets as characters, and produced their own films. The data shared in this article includes field notes, transcripts of video, and the student productions. Our overarching and sometimes intersecting work around filmmaking in preschool and primary classrooms has led to inquiries into the developmental processes of this particular way of making and communicating meaning for children.

## Playing Collaborative Stories in the K–1 Classroom

### Redefining What It Means to Write a Story

Forty-four kindergarten and first-grade students sit in a large circle excitedly eyeing their manila file folders spread out on the floor. Storyboards and lined paper have been replaced with drawings of characters, puppets on popsicle sticks, and the early stages of set designs poking out as if refusing to be contained by a folder. Sylvia, their teacher, sits in the circle and talks with

students about what the work time will look like today. [All teacher and student names are pseudonyms.] She chooses her words carefully, deliberately opening up a new set of possibilities for peer engagement and redefining what it means to “write a story”: “Storytellers . . . You’re going to be invited to find your folder in just a minute and to find those collaborators—those people you are working with and sharing ideas with—so you can continue to work on your story together.”

Sylvia’s emphasis on students working collaboratively sets this work time apart as decidedly different from previous weeks when students independently engaged in paper-and-pencil-based writing activities in preparation for filmmaking. Some conversation naturally occurred between students, but up to this point, the expectation was that each student would produce an individual storyboard on paper using pictures and words. On this day, however, Sylvia and Joanna, Sylvia’s teaching partner, opened up an entirely new world of authorship possibilities for students; the rules of writing and storying had changed, shifting authorship toward collectivity and negotiation.

Sylvia calls out the names written in large black letters on the manila file folders, and students excitedly clamor toward the center of the circle to snatch their folders while looking around for friends to work with. They shift from individual work to shared projects by negotiating what elements to merge from their individual projects as they create one shared project. Small groups and partnerships form around the room as children dump out the objects in their folders and begin making authorly decisions—together. Talk, laughter, and movement create a sense of energy as students work together to make stories. In the back of the classroom, Lucy and Jenna set up their two pieces of scenery on bookshelves in the library area. By putting the scenery on the top shelf, the girls are able to sit on the floor and use the popsicle stick characters as puppets. Nearby, Micah and a group of boys work on the floor to create a three-dimensional ocean scene based on a popular series of books. Across the room, Arianna tries to convince the four other girls in her group they should move from the table to an open space on a wall where they can tape up their farm scenery pieces like the backdrop to a play.

Within the first few minutes of this new collaborative storytelling space, it is evident just how close the connection is between play and storying and how comfortable children are here. Releasing students from independent, paper-and-pencil-based authorship pro-

vides all students with opportunities to access, share, and negotiate stories. The ever-present complaint during writing time of “I don’t know what to write about” is noticeably absent. In fact, when Joanna announces later that morning that it is time to clean up, she hears a chorus of, “Ohhh, can we have more time?”

Over the past 30 years, a variety of writing paradigms have been implemented in primary classrooms; however, even process-oriented paradigms have predominately positioned children as independent authors expected to represent their unique voices on paper. “Voice as individual expression” has been heavily emphasized by writing workshop advocates like Graves (1983), who described voice as “the imprint of ourselves on our writing” (p. 227). Timothy Lensmire (2000), in his critique of writing workshop practices, explored the alternative perspective of “voice as participation,” a concept rooted in critical pedagogy that views a child’s voice as a social self created from the cultural resources at hand. Rather than merely tap into an *already existing* self children reflect on paper through writing, Lensmire argued children actively construct themselves during the writing workshop.

Voice as individual expression was the paradigmatic structure Sylvia and Joanna initially used for storyboarding and filmmaking in their classroom. Students individually recorded stories and plans for films using paper and pencil. This quiet writing time was often interjected with moments of “spontaneous play” (Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010) as students shared ideas and took on the voices of imagined characters, but teachers noticed many students struggled to move from this embodied meaning-making process to recording complex meanings on paper.

A bi-monthly teacher study group that focused on developing a critical media curriculum provided a space for teachers to read and respond to critical research (e.g., Buckingham, 2003) on children’s media production and discuss issues integrating play-based filmmaking into their literacy curricula. The teachers began questioning many basic beliefs about teaching writing and began considering a workshop structure that pushed at this idea of “voice as participation”: Does every child need

to create his/her own story (or in this case, storyboard)? Should a draft (storyboard) be required before publishing (filming) begins? Could some students skip “writing” altogether and take on different roles in the storytelling and filmmaking processes that speak to their personal strengths? Sylvia said they were considering these questions in relation to the current conception of writing time in the classroom where “each student [was] being held accountable for independent work”; teachers began wondering what accountability might look like if they valued other aspects of production beyond the notion of “voice.”

Sylvia and Joanna’s reflective questions about authorship and accountability in the classroom mirror a paradigm shift from a print-privileged writing paradigm to a multiplicity of literacies paradigm that recognizes the diverse practices available for recording meaning. In the print-privileged workshop paradigm, individual writers work alone (although assisted by peers and by teachers, authors hold the responsibility for decision making) and progress toward a publishing-industry model of independent intellectual property and creative production. In play, juxtaposed with a digital text production process like filmmaking, collaborative, collective meaning-making experiences are emphasized and improvisation and connectivity are valued more than individual production (Knobel & Wilber, 2009; Marsh, 2009; Wohlwend, 2010).

In the digital world, it’s not how much you know individually, but how quickly you can access information, remix it, and share it. Individual accountability doesn’t fit as well with digital text production as it does with the literary image of the solitary author. In filmmaking, for example, a single person isn’t expected to produce a film alone—simultaneous collaboration dictates diverse roles (e.g., writers, directors, actors, editors, musicians). The emerging world of digital texts shifts authorship from individuals to the collective, meaning teachers must also rethink traditional “best practices” in the classroom, such as writer’s workshop.

Joanna and Sylvia were immediately attracted to this collective view of authorship because it

mirrored the “focus on a classroom community” they worked so hard to build with children across the school day. Class meetings, group work, and teacher talk in this classroom continually emphasized, “We’re greater together than we are alone.” Both teachers wondered whether this type of community work was reflected in the current configuration of writer’s workshop. Entering into this new terrain of collective authorship and filmmaking, Sylvia and Joanna were excited but also realistic about how “messy” they anticipated the process would be.

They developed a tentative plan to have students wrap up their current independent storyboards and to then introduce a new curricular structure for writing time: the “Storytelling Workshop,” marking an explicit move away

from previous classroom writing routines and opening new possibilities for storying, filmmaking, and working collaboratively with peers. The “Storytelling Workshop” redefined the tools and social structures students could use in their meaning-making and recording processes. This new workshop structure took students and teachers in a different direction where choice in tools and collaborators figured prominently.

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### **Storying with Puppets and Cameras**

As students in this classroom used storyboards as a tool for developing their stories for film, one young student, Arianna, was resolute in her assertion that “what is on my storyboard is not the *real* story. It is not telling the story, just showing what is happening.” Even before students began filming on their own, Arianna’s comment revealed her expert knowledge that film involved more than she and other emergent writers could record on a piece of paper. This knowledge transformed the classroom space as students tried out *new* tools, including handmade toy characters and Flip Cameras, that would help them tell the complex stories they were imagining and playing as storying practices developed.

Each day, as the whole class gathered on the carpet before the projection screen, students watched and analyzed their own explorations as filmmakers and critics. They became leaders as their explorations in filmmaking took center stage, demonstrating their own media knowledge. As teachers, Sylvia and Joanna no longer modeled writing possibilities on chart paper as they had been doing during traditional mini-lessons. Rather, they focused on their students' emerging knowledge of filmmaking.

Students used exploration and production time to play their emerging knowledge of filmmaking. Free of the limits of paper, the story emerged through set creation and enacting characters' movements and dialogue in multiple formats. Two girls, Ida and Simone, made stick puppets for a story they collaboratively wrote and played with four other

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friends. The collaboration resulted in a played text resembling the written storyboard they had created weeks ago; the young filmmakers moved fluidly among roles from scene construction to character portrayal, from technical

advisor to camera operator. The story itself was also malleable, changed, and reinvented with the addition of new background arrangements and role changes.

This "new story" emerged as the girls affixed the revised scenery to the cabinet above their cubbies. In the filming that followed, these young producers negotiated their way through complex play and storying decisions, including the creation of dialogue in character as they used actions and setting to move the story along. Stopping the action to negotiate character movements or voices revealed the momentary nature of the collaborative meaning making. It is also important to note the roles of those students out-of-frame: Ladonna, the child operating the camera, kept the characters and settings appropriately framed as she directed the actors and utilized technical features like zoom to construct a visual story.

As the girls move their puppets back and forth in front of the grassy meadow, they animate and embody the characters in the story they are co-creating. "I'm thirsty," Simone says as she moves her dog puppet to the "house" on the background. "Come on, let's go to the house." Ida joins her and makes a "munching" action with her own mouth.

Ladonna interrupts the action to ask Simone to please move her head because she is in front of the puppet and the camera cannot "see" the character. Simone moves her body to the side but firmly keeps the stick puppet positioned in front of the house.

"Nay, nay, nay . . .," Ida sings as the puppets move back across the scene, the camera following their movements. "Bye, bye."

"Nay, nay, nay . . . going back to the lane. Nay, nay . . .," Ida continues. The camera focuses on Ida's horse, and Simone's dog puppet is out of the frame. Ladonna zooms in and out, trying out this feature, as a finger or hand is temporarily over the camera's eye.

"Lunch time," Simone says in a funny voice as the camera zooms in on her, rather than the puppet scenery. Ida's horse quickly comes over to Simone's puppet as Ida breaks character to negotiate the next move. "No, how about you . . ."

Ladonna says, "Move your head, Ida, I can't see." Ida continues to animate her horse, singing, "Nay, nay, nay . . . I hope you won't mind if I steal some food and water." As her horse continues toward the house, she moves just the front legs of the animal and makes a clicking sound, "knocking" on the door of the house.

The camera frames only Ida as she changes characters and begins barking (taking on another dog character briefly), then knocks on the door again with the horse's front legs.

The materials students used to enact characters and settings and to create film become the writing tools making the story visible. Filmmaking affords new possibilities for enacting character traits and actions that transform the flat characters drawn on storyboards; students use their own physical actions, voice qualities, sound effects, and camera angles to add another dimension to the storying.

The collaborative nature of children's enactments merged film production and play, allowing children to foreground their established knowledge of popular media forms and emerging knowledge of the process of filmmaking. Sylvia and Joanna reflected on this change, concluding that this process opened up entry points for all children to enter

the storying process. Sylvia recalled, “What was most interesting was that kids who were struggling to write or think of a story were able to collaborate, I think, and feel more confident and more a part of the story.”

As these young students collaborated to create, not only was the process transformed, but Sylvia could see “what story looked like shift[ing]” within this collaborative process. Storyboards as a “tool” for writing expanded to include paper settings, embodied characters, popular storylines, and negotiated action played within the classroom. The creative space emphasized and celebrated played texts coming from collaboration and negotiation among peers.

Multimodal storying opened up multiple pathways into text production in this classroom. The young filmmakers played their way through the complex thinking and implementation of the filmmaking process in ways not easily translated to paper. Children found that these active filmmaking processes gave new forms of expression to their elaborate storylines, while teachers negotiated the tensions and successes of these new forms of literacy in partnership with children, facilitating a paradigm shift to new literacies practices.

## Playing with Technology in a Preschool Classroom

In a preschool run by the university, co-teachers Danielle and Michelle decided to place a tub of *Toy Story* character toys on the science table in their classroom. Christy, a coauthor of this article, had spent time in the classroom earlier in the semester, and children had asked questions about and become familiar with the Flip Cameras she had used to film play sessions, so Danielle and Michelle invited her to facilitate the children’s camera explorations there once or twice a week during free playtime. The tub of toys stayed out all week, along with two Flip Cameras for student use on days Christy visited the classroom. The children had already learned that they could look through the screen on one side or wave their hand on the other to see what was being filmed, but they had never handled the cameras themselves in the classroom; those who did have

camera experience from home happily shared their knowledge.

Once instructed by Christy about the fundamentals of camera use (how to press the record button, look at the screen to see the movie, re-watch and listen, etc.), a switch was flipped in the children. They began to experiment and independently explore moviemaking in a variety of ways. Some children recorded their play narratives as deliberate “movies” with little adult intervention needed. They would either balance the camera on the table to act out intricate storylines in front of it, or one child would hold the camera while another did the acting (with varying degrees of success and cooperation), as demonstrated in the following vignette:

Chloe balances the camera on the table, turns it on, and plays a Woody/Jesse birthday story in front of it, complete with blocks as presents and a plastic cake. In her narrative, Woody is trying to surprise Jesse with presents and a party. The dolls talk to one another, bobbing near the camera. Woody exclaims, “Hey! I already get it,” followed by a goofy laugh. She voices Jesse in a high-pitched voice: “You have to make me behind you as I come into the surprise party.”

Sloan approaches and pulls two more toys out of the bin, the dinosaur Rex and Woody’s horse Bullseye, in an attempt to participate in the moviemaking. Chloe continues to make the Woody and Jesse dolls talk to one another. Woody says, “So what d’ya know, it’s your birthday.” Jesse replies, “But you’re supposed to give us a surprise!” Jesse doll “hides” in preparation for the party. Sloan offers to hold the camera for Chloe’s production, but she declines.

Sloan responds, “You can’t really see that,” referring to Chloe’s toy actors, and moves the camera so the toys are in the shot.

Chloe whispers, “Stop,” and moves the camera back.

Aliyah joins them at the table to ask if she can have a turn next and Chloe nods; Sloan, continuing to attempt to participate in the storyline, comments, “Isn’t there another guy [referring to other *Toy Story* characters in the bin]?”

“Yeah, I know that,” Chloe says dismissively.

Together, Aliyah and Sloan try to reposition the camera so Chloe’s characters are captured in the shot.

“Stop,” Chloe warns.

“It’s not gonna make a movie,” Aliyah fires back.

“It already IS making a movie,” Chloe retorts.

Aliyah explains, “No, if you see this red button

. . .". She reaches over and presses the camera's record button for Chloe.

Chloe protests, "Stop! What would you do that for? Would you like me to do that to YOURS?!"

This interaction soon deteriorates into a power struggle, with children's discussions about birthdays first weaving in and out of play narratives, and then morphing into conversations about real-life birthday party plans—especially about who's invited—between peers. Children's friendships and classroom

histories of conflict and cooperation influenced camera use (who gets to re-watch the movies, who gets to control the camera) and media characters in this preschool classroom. Children were encouraged to take another's perspective during conflicts about sharing materials, evident in Chloe's exclamation, "Would you like me to do that to YOURS?!"

Filming a conventional play-based storyline was only one meaning-making tactic used by the children. Within peer culture, children also taught by

## INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

### Media in the Classroom

The authors share ways to create a developmentally oriented and media-rich learning space. The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org show how other forms of media can be used in the classroom.

#### Color My World: Expanding Meaning Potential through Media

Using different writing/drawing materials (e.g., markers, colored pencils, pastels, etc.), students learn how to communicate different moods and/or feelings to support their written ideas and how authors do the same through their work.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/color-world-expanding-meaning-30559.html>

#### Designing Elements of Story in *Little Blue and Little Yellow*

In this series of four lessons, students will explore key elements of design in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* to learn about setting, character relationships, and plot.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/designing-elements-story-little-30739.html>

#### The Natural World as Inspiration: An Outdoor Art Show

Children incorporate materials from outdoors with paints or crayons to create pieces of art to display on their clotheslines, fences, or porches for a neighborhood art show.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/natural-world-inspiration-outdoor-30610.html>

#### Let the Show Begin! Literary Talent Show

Children choose their favorite songs, poems, or stories to act out in a talent show for friends and family.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/show-begin-literary-talent-30609.html>

#### Draw a Story: Stepping from Pictures to Writing

Students draw a series of pictures that tell a story, including character action and problem/solution. They "read" their story to others, transcribe it into writing, and create an accordion book.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/draw-story-stepping-from-45.html>

—Lisa Fink  
[www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)

analogy, comparing the operation of the camera to similar objects, like still cameras or cellular phones:

Aliyah says, referring to the camera, “We got this, Eleanor, look! Watch what people are doing . . . and if you wanna see the movie, Mark, you press this button, see?” Aliyah shows Mark how to re-watch and/or re-listen to what was recorded; Sam plays with *Toy Story* characters nearby without a camera. Aliyah exclaims, “It’s like calling on the phone.” She holds the camera up to her ear like a phone and she teaches Mark to do the same.

Sam notices what they are doing. He says, “Hey, I want to try. Telephone, hey, I want to try.”

“No,” answers Mark.

Sam turns to Aliyah and asks again, “Let me try.” He is ignored.

Sam becomes frustrated, yelling, “Hey, I want to try, nobody’s giving me a turn!”

Michelle, the teacher, intervenes, explaining it’s not a phone, it’s a camera. Aliyah immediately switches tactics and begins moviemaking conventionally again with the toys. Aliyah explains, “Or you can make a picture . . . can make video. And if you want to see the movie, you . . .” As soon as Michelle leaves, she uses it as a phone again, then resumes moviemaking.

Children possessed different levels of technical expertise (the transcripts above are from two different groups of children on the same day), but even initially, their experimentation was playful and smart. That the majority of the films they produced were bumpy, blurry three-second close-ups of the table or fingers was not just a matter of emerging understanding about how the cameras worked; it was also part of their unique and playful process of discovery. Over time, children tended to progress through various stages of experimentation with the cameras. Loosely, through play, this preschool group progressed from being curious about camera functions in general to learning some ways to control what they recorded. From there, they played for several weeks, usually interested in pretending to “take pictures,” as though the video camera were a still camera, or listening to the audio they produced with the camera pressed to their ear (since the images were often jarred and blurred without a clear focus). Eventually, with peer guidance and “just in time” teacher/researcher mediation, this progressed from a focus on listening to *audio* to a focus on watching *video image*.

A catalyst came a month later when children were invited to view their video again immediately on a larger computer screen, which they enjoyed. Immediate review of films sparked interest and enthusiasm. Soon, children intent on making “documentary-style” films of objects and actions around the room regularly produced more deliberate, stable, multi-second shots of intended subjects. In these ways, children collaboratively discovered what it meant to produce a video product that was intentionally constructed and interesting to re-watch. Play and collaborative storying allowed them to experiment with multiple modes of production simultaneously and learn informally from one another; those were the moments of learning that stuck.

## Playing and Producing Popular Media in Second Grade

Garrison, a second grader, stands over the table of Lego props, carefully considering each and every multicolored block. He and his friends Otto and Walter have been at work on their stop-motion Star Wars movie for two weeks and have reached the epic rescue of the stranded soldiers. “Are you dummies going to help me with this?” he playfully calls to his friends. Otto and Walter descend upon the table, Otto wielding a digital camera while Walter searches for fishing line. Today, their Lego space ship will fly for the camera.

The ease with which Garrison begins this production day belies the tension and, at times, chaos that characterized the beginning stages of their movie in an elective film class run by Nicholas, coauthor of this article. Initially, the trio had envisioned their movie as an animated series of hand-drawn pictures, using Otto’s copy of *You Can Draw: Star Wars* (Burton, Busch, & Hodges, 2007) as their inspiration. Plans changed after Otto experienced a weeklong illness and access to the book was restricted: no inspiration, no movie. After a day of considering options, Nicholas, Garrison, and Walter were able to pool their resources and found enough Legos and Star Wars minifigures (the characters in Lego play sets) to provide the stuff of a movie. By Otto’s return the following week, Garrison and Walter already had loosely constructed



a story and, after a period of trial and error with a variety of cameras, decided upon stop motion as their method of production.

It is important to note that Garrison, Otto, and Walter had not spent time drafting a script or preparing a storyboard. Production became their main concern, allowing them to focus on the creation of the Lego structures and the methods that would capture the action of their film. Unfettered by the demands of a storyboard and script, the filming sessions for these three boys were playful. They would spend entire class sessions building, collapsing, and rebuilding structures—activity that little resembled movie production. “Do you know they’re playing with Legos?” another teacher passing through the space asked. “They’re filming,” Nicholas assured them, knowing they had not heard the talk about how a tower made just a bit wider would look better on camera, resulting in a complete rebuilding of the structure. True, these boys were playing with the materials, but all in the name of production.

Allowing this group of boys to work on their movie without a script was harrowing; as an educator, the process of drafting a script, storyboarding, and then moving into production is seen as the ideal way to teach media production. What Nicholas came to realize as he watched this group of boys, day after day, week after week, engage in the process of filming and exper-

imenting with technology, was that the popular culture content of the Lego Star Wars play set already supplied a story that played out in the background of what the boys were currently producing. The Star Wars movies—“the first three because [we] just don’t get those

new ones,”—provided both a social and narrative glue (Dolby, 2003), binding the trio and the story of their movie together. Through their play, they engaged the processes of production simultaneously, although Garrison mainly concerned himself with the material “stuff” of the movie (construction,

movement, etc.) while Walter concerned himself with the methods of filming. Otto, due to erratic attendance throughout the process, offered help to either child when present.

Play in the physical sense translated to verbal play as well, promoting opportunities for the boys to empower one another while being flexible with their identities within the process of production. Consider the following vignette:

Garrison searches the table. “Does anyone have an idea of where fishing wire is in the plastic bag?” Otto shrugs his shoulders, “I don’t know, I don’t see it.” Garrison pauses, takes a deep breath and says, “Oh, actually we don’t even need the plastic bag.”

“Why?” Otto inquires.

“Walter,” Garrison redirects his talk to their third production team member, “did you think the plastic bag was visible to the TV?”

Walter considers. “Uh-uh,” he replies, shaking his head.

“Good,” Garrison says, and returns to the box of Legos on the table.

Otto pauses, picks up a Lego minifigure, and says out loud to no one in particular, “I was hoping we could have a crane. A thing you pull it [the minifigure] up with.”

Garrison responds: “You could use something, what everyone in here calls a building block.” He pauses, leans over the table in Otto’s direction, holds up a single building block, and slowly says, “Lay. Goes.”

Walter, returning to the table without the fishing line, takes the block out of Garrison’s hand. “Say what?”

“No,” Garrison tells Walter, “act like you’re really fascinated about it.”

Walter transfixed his gaze upon the block. “Cool. What is a Lego?”

Garrison busies himself with the building of a tower. “You’re going to have to figure that out yourself.”

Within this portion of dialogue, Garrison maintains meaning for the overall production, solidifying the story and driving the production process forward. He is exercising leadership in sophisticated ways, drawing upon his shared history with the “dummies” with whom he is making the movie, simultaneously engaging Walter in ways that allow him flexibility in his contributions to production. While Garrison maintains the meaning of the movie, he defers to Walter in deciding to focus on stop-motion animation, recognizing Walter’s expertise and overall familiarity with the process based

*Play in the physical sense translated to verbal play as well, promoting opportunities for the boys to empower one another while being flexible with their identities within the process of production.*

on a previous stop-motion animation class. While Otto was often absent from production, Garrison ensures he is credited during the editing, despite Walter's objections. "No, no, he was here. He worked when he could," was Garrison's response as he added Otto's name to the movie credits.

Garrison, Walter, and Otto are an exemplar of what is possible as children come together to make meaning in multimodal ways. They effectively played their way through the filming of a movie, using Lego mini-figures, building blocks, and their own popular culture knowledge as mediators, reifying the proposition we introduced earlier in this article: that play can foster a negotiated and co-produced text within embodied participatory digital literacies.

## Conclusion

A play-based media literacies curriculum offers a way to think beyond a print-intensive reading/writing workshop and to imagine a developmentally oriented and media-rich learning space where children produce digital film and collaborate within and around a played text. The literacy focus is on understanding how children think and make meaning together during play and media productions, with the goal of supporting their video explorations and mediating their collaborative film and drama projects. This work is critical, but not through discussions deconstructing the gendered or raced stereotypes in popular media and books, an approach with limited success with preschoolers (Davies, 2003). We found it helpful here to reframe the notion of *critical* to fit the early childhood setting, that is, to focus on children's relative classroom positionings within the here-and-now conflicts and negotiations that often occur as children play, share materials, and work out who should play with what. This brings notions of equity to the fore in ways that place responsibility on teachers: to question what counts as literacy in their classrooms and who is privileged by a focus on print and speech. The play-based curriculum described here offers a way to expand children's participation in literacy events by privileging children's diverse interests and abilities

in play and technologies, and by recognizing roles beyond writers to include those not typically valued in school literacy curricula, such as actors or camera operators.

Teachers here worked to intentionally reposition children in relation to their favorite media texts and characters. From a developmental perspective, when children learn to think as media producers and not just consumers, they begin to see multimedia texts as malleable and negotiable through their coauthoring experiences in collaborative productions. This repositioning opens more equitable ways for diverse learners to perform literate identities by expanding the range of possible avenues of development. Expanding options for meaning making moves play and filmmaking to the center, with the aim of helping children produce and critically engage popular media that characterize 21st-century childhoods.

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